

First Order 361

Chapter 361 We have a spy

Post-battle rebuilding was a very tedious process, because the ruins would have to be cleared up first before the structures could be rebuilt. They had to experience pain before they could receive a new lease of life.

Ren Xiaosu took the lead in burying their dead companions. He initially wanted to erect a stele for each of them, but later, he realized some of the bandits did not even have names.

If Ren Xiaosu had not established this settlement, these people would have been forgotten after their deaths.

He took out a pen and a notepad from his storage space and handed them to Yang Xiaojin, saying, "Make a record of those who are still alive. This will be our future roster."

A regular army should first have a roster. It meant that everyone's names would be recorded, and the people on it would be recognized.

But when Yang Xiaojin started the recording process, she was put in a dilemma. The bandits did not report their real names to her. Instead, they gave their nicknames such as Rat, Crow, Mud Pit, Rotten Egg...

Just by their names alone, you would know they were not respectable people!

Yang Xiaojin said patiently, "This roster is only for recording your real names. Besides, aren't your nicknames really..."

Jin Lan chuckled and said, "Boss Lady, you should allow them to use their nicknames. If you call them by their real names, they might not even respond. All of us are bandits, so we should be called by our nicknames."

Yang Xiaojin thought for a moment and said with a smile, "Sure!"

But at this moment, Xu Jinyuan, who was in charge of the clean-up crew, suddenly came up to Ren Xiaosu and said, "Boss, we found something in the ruins."

Ren Xiaosu looked at the thing Xu Jinyuan was holding. It turned out to be a satellite phone! Seeing that the satellite phone was already damaged, he asked Xu Jinyuan curiously, "Where'd ya find it?"

"It was hidden under the bed in the ruins of our brick house." Xu Jinyuan said, "There were twenty people sleeping in that house, and I remember that a bandit called Old Fox slept on that particular bedroll."

"Where's Old Fox now?" Ren Xiaosu said, "Get him here, I want to question him."

"He's dead." Xu Jinyuan said, "That's why I secretly came over to seek Boss's instructions."

Ren Xiaosu frowned. The satellite phone was definitely not something bandits could own. The owner of this satellite phone must've used it to report information to a consortium.

He wondered which consortium this satellite phone was linked to.

Was it the Qing Consortium? Or the Zong Consortium?

Anything was possible.

These two consortiums had been eyeing the valley for a long time now, so they might have planted quite a few spies.

"Don't breathe a word about it. If it doesn't belong to Brother Old Fox, his reputation will be tarnished after his death if this matter gets out." Ren Xiaosu said, "This satellite phone could also belong to somebody else."

Ren Xiaosu even suspected the phone could be Xu Jinyuan's. He had read in a detective novel back at Stronghold 88 that stated how more than 40% of the witnesses and discoverers of a homicide turned out to actually be the real murderer.

However, Ren Xiaosu did not bring up that doubt and let Xu Jinyuan continue working.

Yang Xiaojin walked over and asked, "What's the matter?"

"I'm afraid we can't stay here any longer." Ren Xiaosu said, "After we go back and get Yan Liuyuan and the others, we'll head northwest to look for a more secretive location to settle down again. Our activities here have likely been leaked. It's not so bad if it's the Qing Consortium, but if it's the Zong Consortium that planted their spies here, we won't be able to fend them off when their military attacks us here."

"Mhm." Yang Xiaojin agreed with him. She did not think it was wrong for Ren Xiaosu to be more cautious.

The reason why the Zong Consortium had trouble fighting the bandits was because the bandits were always wandering around. If they settled down here, it would be extremely easy for the Zong Consortium to deal with them. So Ren Xiaosu wanted to head deeper into the mountains and find a new place to reestablish the settlement.

In the evening, Jin Lan went to look for Ren Xiaosu. But when he came up to him, he heard Ren Xiaosu whispering to Yang Xiaojin, "The northern bandits have killed so many of our brothers, so I've already contacted Old Xu and told him to lead his troops here next week. We'll settle the score with those northern bandits then!"

Jin Lan was a loudmouth. Once he learned about this, everyone in the settlement would find out about it as well.

Ren Xiaosu turned to Jin Lan. "Are you looking for me for something?" "Oh." The dumbfounded Jin Lan came back to his senses and said, "Our brothers wanted to ask you... uh, I forgot what their question was!"

"Then go and remember before coming back here," Ren Xiaosu snapped at him.

After Jin Lan went back to the others, the news of Xu Xianchu coming here with troops next week started spreading.

The bandits were stunned when they heard this. Everyone was fervently discussing how Master Xu would definitely bring others from Stronghold 178 with him. In that case, they would all have to start putting on a good performance from tomorrow onwards so that they would not disgrace their boss, Ren Xiaosu!

The days of the post-disaster rebuilding were very dull. It wasn't like people could always wallow in pain and sorrow. Everyone had to continue leading their lives.

Jin Lan and the others were working harder than before as they were still thinking about the motorcycles.

Three days later, a figure left the settlement in the middle of the night while everyone was asleep.

The settlement was not quiet, as the bandits snored loudly.

When the person was about to leave, he suddenly turned around and had a look at the settlement. It was as though he had a reluctant look in his eyes. But after struggling for a minute, he still decided he was going to escape north. He was going to leave this place and head north!

But before he could even take two steps, that figure saw Ren Xiaosu waiting in the shadows and looking at him with a smile.

Ren Xiaosu chuckled, "So it was you. What's your nickname? Rat?"

The bandit named Rat immediately knelt down. "I... I had no choice."

"Where did you come from?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

Rat replied softly, "I was originally from the bandit lair at Mt. Dingyuan in the north. The bandit leader at Mt. Dingyuan sent me to Mt. Daban. Later on, I came here together with the bandits of Mt. Daban, but they also had someone supporting them from the shadows."

"You're pretty honest for telling me everything." Ren Xiaosu sighed.

Rat was getting a little anxious. "I didn't want to leave either. But even if I stayed, I wouldn't survive when those people at Mt. Dingyuan started spreading the news that I'm a spy."

This was the awkward situation that a spy had to go through. If the beginning was already a mistake, it would lead to the wrong ending. Rat had also been tempted in recent days to stay here and lead a good life, but how could he still stay? When the time came, both sides would probably not spare him.

“Is that thing yours?” Ren Xiaosu asked but did not explicitly mention what he was referring to. “What were you doing with it?”

Rat said, “The satellite phone was issued by my previous leader some time ago. It’s used for sending intel.”

Ren Xiaosu nodded in acknowledgment. That matched precisely with what he was asking.

But what should he do with Rat? Let him go? Ren Xiaosu was not that kind.

But when he thought of the days they spent together, Ren Xiaosu felt a little melancholic.

Ren Xiaosu whispered, “If you didn’t try to leave or betray me, I might not have done anything to you when the truth came to light. Xu Jinyuan was originally a spy too, but he made the right choices. Rat, let’s become bandits again in our next lives. But for now, it’s goodbye to you.”

Chapter 362 Harboring evil intentions

It seemed that Rat was also quite the patient one. It wasn’t until the third day after Ren Xiaosu had released the information that he tried to leave the settlement. Ren Xiaosu had not slept well in recent days because he wanted to find the spy who might still be alive.

He had no choice but to root out that person, because if they kept such a person around, they might get found by the Zong Consortium before they could grow stronger even if they moved to another location.

Ren Xiaosu believed the northern bandits were likely to be supported by the Zong Consortium. Although he had no evidence of that, Zong Cheng was supposed to bring them to the front lines at Mt. Shangying, Mt. Lianta, and Mt. Dingyuan in the original mission plan.

Therefore, Ren Xiaosu thought the place Zong Cheng wanted to bring them to would definitely not be simple. It might even turn out to be the bandit lair controlled by the Zong Consortium.

But what was Zong Cheng planning to do by bringing them to Mt. Dingyuan? Was he thinking of putting on an act for the Yang Consortium with his own bandits?

Ren Xiaosu felt this matter had more than met the eye.

At this moment, Wang Congyang was walking alone on a path in the valleys and hills of the Northern Wastes. But as he kept walking, his pace slowed.

“Come out,” Wang Congyang said harshly.

Ahead of him, a young man walked out from behind a mound. He said to Wang Congyang with a warm smile, “Chief Wang, I’ve been waiting here for a long time. Let me introduce myself. I’m Zong Cheng from the Zong Consortium.”

Wang Congyang looked around and asked, “Did you come alone?”

“Of course not.” Zong Cheng smiled and said, “How could I come alone when I’m dealing with you?”

As soon as Zong Cheng stopped speaking, another 30 soldiers appeared from behind the mound. However, Wang Congyang realized these soldiers were acting a little strange. They were behaving unnaturally, as though they were puppets. They didn't act like normal humans.

He frowned and said, "Why are you looking for me?"

Wang Congyang was wondering how Zong Cheng caught wind of his escape. He actually predicted he would pass by here and came here in advance to wait for him?

If Ren Xiaosu were present, he would have sensed that something was wrong. Since the spy's satellite phone had been smashed apart during the battle, how could Rat have relayed the intel to Zong Cheng?

"You and I have had dealings with each other for quite some time already." Zong Cheng said with a smile, "You're one of the most difficult opponents our Zong Consortium has faced in the valley. I didn't expect you to end up in such a predicament today."

"Like you know anything." Wang Congyang sneered. If he weren't afraid of Stronghold 178's strength, Ren Xiaosu would not have been able to do anything to him. "And when have I ever had any dealings with you... Oh, I see, so the bandits at Mt. Dingyuan are your Zong Consortium's people."

"It's much easier speaking with smart people." Zong Cheng said, "I'm curious about something. Is there bad blood between you and Ren Xiaosu?"

Wang Congyang scorned, "That's none of your business. As the second generation member of a consortium, aren't you ashamed to come here and mix with bandits?"

Zong Cheng did not mind it. "This valley has always been our Zong Consortium's territory. By rights, our Zong Consortium should be the ones controlling this area. But, Chief Wang, you're the one who's acting rather unusually. Why are you staking everything just so you can kill Ren Xiaosu when you've always been a cautious person? Surely he did not kill your wife and children or something, right?"

Wang Congyang's mood instantly changed. He suddenly said, "I've had a grudge against that Ren Xiaosu since we were at Stronghold 113. Am I wrong for attempting to kill him after he killed my brother?"

Zong Cheng asked, "Then what do you know about Ren Xiaosu? I heard he's on very good terms with Zhang Jinglin ever since they were at Stronghold 113. Zhang Jinglin also intends for him to take over his role. Isn't that because he favors Ren Xiaosu and wants him to become the next commander of Stronghold 178? Aren't you afraid Stronghold 178 will get rid of you for trying to kill him?"

Wang Congyang laughed and answered with a half-truth, "Where'd you get that info from? I was at Stronghold 113 back then. When Zhang Jinglin was teaching in the town's school, Ren Xiaosu was just his substitute teacher. If he's on good terms with Zhang Jinglin, would I dare to kill him? All of you were fooled by him!"

Wang Congyang was harboring evil intentions. He was afraid Zong Cheng did not dare to make a move on Ren Xiaosu because of the relationship between Ren Xiaosu and Zhang Jinglin!

Wang Congyang deliberated for a couple seconds and said, "You might not know it, but I was the one who assigned the escorts for Zhang Jinglin when he traveled back to Stronghold 178 from Stronghold 113. But for someone as high-ranking as Zhang Jinglin, do you think he would make friends with normal people?"

Zong Cheng frowned. Why did Wang Congyang's words differ so much from the account Ren Xiaosu had portrayed?

But as they had been dealing with Wang Congyang for some time, they knew he was not a rash person. Since Wang Congyang was willing to make trouble for Ren Xiaosu, could it really be that he might not be on such good terms with Zhang Jinglin after all?

Zong Cheng smiled and said, "Are you saying you want me to seek revenge for you? Why don't you join us and we'll seek revenge on your behalf together?"

Wang Congyang smiled as he retreated. "Once I left Stronghold 113, I said I'd never work for anyone else ever again. I'll only die for myself!"

"That's such a pity," Zong Cheng said with some regret. "But you killed so many bandits under my Zong Consortium's flag. I'm afraid it won't be appropriate to just let you leave like this."

"You think you can stop me with just these people?" Wang Congyang laughed uproariously. "That depends on whether you're capable of doing so or not!"

As soon as he finished speaking, Wang Congyang suddenly noticed the faces of the 30 soldiers behind Zong Cheng were glowing with silvery strands. After that, all of them rushed at him!

These soldiers were much faster than Wang Congyang could imagine. He even felt like they were like 30 standard supernatural beings!

"Nanosoldiers?!" Wang Congyang was bewildered. Although he had heard of nanosoldiers before, he had not seen them for himself. But Wang Congyang could not understand something. Wasn't it only the Li Consortium and the Yang Consortium that had the nanosoldiers? Why would Zong Cheng also have nanosoldiers among his subordinates?

However, Wang Congyang was already prepared. In just an instant, the rugged and menacing steam locomotive had already materialized into reality and driven off in the opposite direction with Wang Congyang on it!

A nanosoldier leaped up and caught a handle on the side of the steam locomotive. It seemed like he was trying to climb onto the train to kill Wang Congyang. But to Zong Cheng's surprise, Wang Congyang just kicked the nanosoldier off.

The power of this kick was so great it was far beyond Zong Cheng's imagination. It was not a power that standard supernatural beings could achieve! This Wang Congyang was the best of the best even among supernatural beings!

When that nanosoldier was kicked down, his body blocked the other pursuing nanosoldiers to the rear. When they got up again to chase after him, they realized the steam locomotive had already sped off at a speed of a 120 kilometers per hour.

Some bandits in the gullies in the distance suddenly crawled out and started shooting mercilessly at the steam locomotive. However, Wang Congyang was already inside the train and the bandits could not hurt him.

One of the bandits carrying an RPG launcher fired it at the train. But surprisingly, even when the RPG hit the steam locomotive, it only caused the strange train to wobble a little.

Wang Congyang suddenly coughed up a mouthful of blood in the train. He wiped it off and growled, "Your Zong Consortium's people are like the hyenas that like attacking people from behind. I'll see how long you all can survive here in the Northwest!"

Zong Cheng watched calmly as the steam locomotive departed. He knew he had underestimated what Wang Congyang could do.

Chapter 363 Delivering warmth to the valley

In the settlement, Jin Lan suddenly ran madly towards Ren Xiaosu and said, "Boss, Boss, those people delivering the stuff are here!"

Ren Xiaosu wondered, "What do you mean by those people delivering the stuff?"

"The people who previously gave us the firearms and motorcycles." Jin Lan yelled, "I saw their convoy from the hillside. They're almost here!"

"Let's go and take a look." Ren Xiaosu and Jin Lan headed east. Without needing to say anything, Yang Xiaojin started to choose a sniping spot in case the two parties got into a conflict.

During this period, Ren Xiaosu had frequently been hearing from the bandits that there were people delivering food and weapons into the valley. However, he had not seen it for himself yet.

Ren Xiaosu stood on a mound and looked at the approaching convoy. There was no logo on the bodies of the vehicles. He realized the convoy seemed to be very familiar with the valley, as they knew exactly where the locations of the gullies and rivers were.

It seemed this group of people had been keeping themselves rather busy in the valley for the past few years.

Before the convoy arrived, the people in the vehicles were waving from afar when they saw Ren Xiaosu and the others. They were acting in such a friendly manner that it seemed as though they had spotted their fellow villagers.

However, the convoy did not approach them and stopped just under a loess slope in the distance. 30 people jumped out of the vehicles and walked slowly towards them. The group looked to be moving free

and easy, but they constantly maintained an attacking formation. The soldiers on both flanks were aiming their guns and already had their weapons cocked in case they needed to open fire at any time.

Ren Xiaosu felt that the disposition of these soldiers was extremely familiar.

All of a sudden, Ren Xiaosu thought the group's leader looked a little familiar, but he couldn't recall where he had seen him before. After these people slowly got closer, the leader smiled and said, "Hey, buddy, who's in charge here?"

Ren Xiaosu chuckled and said, "I'm in charge here. Who are you?"

The leader said with a smile, "I'm here to deliver firearms and supplies to you all."

The sincere look he portrayed was like he was from the consortium dropping by the stronghold's factories to hand out rice to the workers there.

Ren Xiaosu looked him over. "You're from the Qing Consortium?"

The leader raised an eyebrow and said, "Nope."

"Why do I find you so familiar-looking?" Ren Xiaosu wondered, "Have we met before?"

The leader smiled and said, "I also find you rather familiar. Perhaps it's fate that brought us together."

During the conversation, the soldiers behind the person speaking started making some subtle movements as everyone placed their right index finger onto the trigger of their rifle. The atmosphere did not feel right. It was like they could get ambushed at any moment!

Ren Xiaosu glanced at them and saw the atmosphere was getting more intense, so he decided to be direct and said, "I'm Ren Xiaosu."

Off to the side, Jin Lan and the others were all confused. What was their boss doing?

To their surprise, when the leader heard the name "Ren Xiaosu," he suddenly froze. After that, he carefully sized up Ren Xiaosu and asked, "You're Ren Xiaosu?"

Jin Lan and the others' jaws dropped. Was their boss this famous? It looked like the bandits themselves still did not understand their boss!

Ren Xiaosu asked, "How do I prove it?"

The leader gave it some thought and said, "What has Boss Luo given you before?"

Ren Xiaosu hesitated for a moment before answering, "A banner..."

"Hahaha." The leader burst into laughter. "So it's really you. Hello, my name is Xu Man."

Xu Man appeared to be very polite. Meanwhile, Jin Lan and the others were totally confused by the developments. What was this banner they were talking about?

Jin Lan asked, "Boss, did you used to be a doctor?"

As far as Jin Lan and the others knew, only doctors would receive banners these days.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Jin Lan and the others and coughed. "Y'all've also used the black medicine to treat your wounds."

It was Xu Man who had discovered Ren Xiaosu's presence in the Jing Mountains back then. The two of them had clashed before.

But it was late at night back then, and the two of them did not engage in close combat. Furthermore, Ren Xiaosu's face was really dirty at that time. So they did not recognize each other even though they were talking face to face.

Xu Man continued, "Back then, you were also in the Jing Mountains. But I probably did not see you because you did not enter the ruined city. I was tasked with capturing Xu Xianchu that night."

Ren Xiaosu immediately understood.

Then Xu Man said, "But you still look very familiar to me. Have we met before?"

"Hahaha, I don't look familiar, I really don't." Ren Xiaosu laughed. "I got the wrong person earlier."

Of course he couldn't fucking look familiar to Xu Man. Otherwise, Qing Zhen, Luo Lan, and Xu Xianchu might just find out what really happened that night!

Xu Man wondered, "But you really look familiar! Wait, you're..."

Ren Xiaosu began sweating. He quickly changed the subject and asked, "What're you doing here? Don't tell me the Qing Consortium is supplying all the guns into the valley?"

"Oh, this has been going on since some time ago. I only started coming here in the last year." Xu Man said, "At that time, Mr. Qing Zhen had been placed under house arrest, and our men were separated when they got assigned out to the other combat troops. I received Mr. Qing Zhen's instructions and secretly came to the valley to take over the duties here."

Ren Xiaosu suddenly realized it was Qing Zhen who had planned everything here, not the Qing Consortium!

But if it happened several years ago, then he must have gotten all of the plans in the valley started while he was still under tight watch by the Qing Consortium's Board of Directors.

He had planned really far ahead!

The Yang Consortium, the Li Consortium, and the Zong Consortium were really unlucky to encounter such an opponent. Initially, the Zong Consortium wanted to take control of Stronghold 178 from within

during the absence of Zhang Jinglin. In the end, Qing Zhen purposely sent Zhang Jinglin back to Stronghold 178. He wondered whether the Zong Consortium's people had seen red when they learned about that.

Xu Man suddenly said, "Boss Luo has specifically instructed us to inform you if we met you that we're ready to take action. Of course, even if you can't make it back in time, he'll still help you bring your brother and the others out."

"Is Qing Zhen preparing to rescue Luo Lan?" Ren Xiaosu wondered, "Aren't you afraid that I'll betray y'all after you tell me this?"

"Boss Luo said you can be trusted." Xu Man said with a smile, "As subordinates, we just follow orders."

Ren Xiaosu smacked his lips. The feeling of being trusted was quite nice.

He asked Xu Man, "Then what about all y'all? What are your plans? Are you going to attack the Zong Consortium?"

Since Qing Zhen had prepared backup plans for the north, they would be put to good use when the time arrived, right?

Xu Man explained, "We've only managed to rope over some of the bandits in the north to our side, so it'll be impossible for us to defeat the Zong Consortium. Mr. Qing Zhen's plans here were not made so that he could send us to our deaths by taking on the Zong Consortium."

Ren Xiaosu started to get curious. "Then what are y'all doing here?"

Xu Man hesitated for a moment before saying, "The peak of the upstream floods of the river will be here in about ten days. At that time, we'll destroy all the bridges in the valley to stop the Zong Consortium from coming further south to aid the Yang Consortium. Meanwhile, we'll have our other men head south to destroy all the factories outside of the Yang Consortium's strongholds."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. He felt that Qing Zhen's plans were somehow all linked to one another.

It was like Qing Zhen had been planning to incorporate the entire Northwest and Southwest into the Qing Consortium's territory since several years ago.

Chapter 364 I'll wait for you here

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu felt that Qing Zhen was just like a shining star in the Northwest and Southwest. He completely overshadowed those from the other consortiums and made them appear dull and gloomy.

It was not that the other consortiums were not smart, but that Qing Zhen's plans were much more thought out.

The series after series of Qing Zhen's plans involved both luck and calculation.

From the start, Qing Zhen and Luo Lan had gotten their hands on the Li Consortium's breakthrough in nanotech, yet they gave it to the Yang Consortium through Yang Xiaojin just like that.

At that time, Qing Zhen asked Yang Xiaojin, "Will the Yang Consortium put the knowledge to military use after acquiring what was originally a technology used for medical treatments?"

Obviously, Qing Zhen already knew the answer. How could the Yang Consortium possibly not put the nanomachines to military use? These were greedy consortiums whose appetites would never be satisfied.

The destruction of Stronghold 109 had a significant impact on the Li Consortium. As a result, several internal factions of the Li Consortium with their own interests were fighting one another to shirk responsibility for the defeat.

At that time, the Li Consortium's higher-ups also needed a target to vent their anger on and prove they were not weaklings. If they let the matter slide, an even greater disaster might befall the entire organization. Therefore, they needed to take revenge.

The Li Consortium's decision to start a war with the Yang Consortium was definitely not done out of spite. It was a decision they had to make after considering their political interests.

The Li Consortium wanted to kill Li Shentan, but he had already disappeared.

The Li Consortium also wanted to exterminate the Experimentals. But at the time, the Yang Consortium had already amassed their troops along their shared border, so they couldn't worry about the Experimentals.

As such, the Li Consortium directed all of their anger at the Yang Consortium.

In fact, the Qing Consortium joined the battlefield much later. It was originally a war between the Yang Consortium and the Li Consortium and had nothing to do with the Qing Consortium.

Qing Zhen had predicted back then that the Board would send him to the front lines, so he waited patiently in his villa.

After he made his comeback, Qing Zhen immediately killed Qing Yun and chose to cooperate with the Yang Consortium.

It looked like he had formed an alliance with the Yang Consortium, but he was actually holding their main forces at the front line of the battlefield in the south.

This was probably one of the most critical portions of Qing Zhen's plan.

Later on, Qing Zhen deliberately double-crossed the Yang Consortium with his sudden withdrawal of the troops. This led to Luo Lan's house arrest and caused the Yang Consortium to have to dispatch more troops to fill the gap at the front line.

And currently, the mysterious force that was preparing to rescue Luo Lan, as well as the bandits he had been consolidating in the North, were all capable of troubling the defenseless Yang Consortium to the point they would not sleep well at night.

It seemed Qing Zhen wasn't planning to swallow the Yang Consortium immediately. He had too much patience for that. Right now, he was only looking to disrupt the Yang Consortium's well-oiled supply chain. The collapse of the rear logistics might seem to be just an economic setback, but in war, it could mean that the frontline soldiers would not get issued with enough bullets to fight!

It might not be felt too soon since the Yang Consortium's reserves could still last for a while. But over time, the Qing Consortium would probably be able to pin the Yang Consortium down on the ground and give them a good thrashing!

If the Zong Consortium wanted to head south at this moment, they would be stopped by the arrival of the spring floods.

Although the Zong Consortium could still build pontoon bridges, the intensity of the spring floods in the valley was absolutely not something that could be resolved by just constructing several dozen pontoon bridges. There were thousands of riverbeds, and the ground resembled broken porcelain scattered around in the middle of a river.

Qing Zhen had even calculated the timing perfectly. It would take place ten days later!

But Ren Xiaosu could not understand who could possibly be capable of storming the stronghold to save Luo Lan. The Qing Consortium's main forces were at the front line in the south as well!

Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked, "But there should also be the Zong Consortium's people who are part of the northern bandits, right? What if they try to stop you?"

Xu Man smiled and said, "They think our Qing Consortium is trying to compete with them for the valley's territory, but they're too shortsighted by thinking that way. We've never regarded them as a threat before. We might be in the south for several days before they realize we're gone."

The Zong Consortium had always thought the Qing Consortium was trying to seize the valley for themselves. But in reality, that was not the Qing Consortium's target.

Ren Xiaosu took a deep breath. "I'll prepare to head south as well and cooperate with your people to save Luo Lan."

"The ones rescuing Luo Lan are not our people." Xu Man said, "So you don't have to treat them as your friends."

However, Xu Man did not disclose too much information to Ren Xiaosu. That was all he could say.

When they finished talking, Xu Man was about to leave. Off to the side, Jin Lan suddenly said, "Since you're already here, why don't you give us some stuff before you leave?"

“Oh.” Xu Man was stunned. He had totally forgotten about giving out firearms and supplies to them. “What do you all need?”

Ren Xiaosu could not be bothered to slowly choose, so he said, “Just leave all of it behind.”

Jin Lan and the others were shocked. Their boss was way too different. By saying it that way, how could the people be willing to give them anything?

Xu Man’s mouth twitched. “Why don’t you ask me to let you keep the resupply vehicles as well?”

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment. “Well, I guess that would work too. After unloading the supplies, you’ll have four empty vehicles. Since there aren’t that many of you, just leave these four vehicles behind for us.”

Off to the side, Xu Jinyuan whispered, “Boss is really different. Usually, we have to wait for the consortium’s people to come with the supplies and accept whatever they offer to us. Then we use the supplies to go and rob others. But, Boss, he just robs them instead.”

Xu Man frowned and considered it for a couple seconds before saying with a sigh, “Alright, you’re so pushy.”

Jin Lan and the others gasped. Who the hell was their boss, really? Never mind the Qing Consortium’s people being so polite with them earlier, they even gave him whatever he wanted and the resupply vehicles as well.

Ren Xiaosu stared at Jin Lan. “What’re you still standing there for? Go and take the stuff.” He turned to Xu Man and said, “I won’t keep y’all for lunch. I still have to hurry up and get ready.”

With that, Ren Xiaosu turned around and left, leaving Xu Man standing there with his eyes twitching. After giving them all that stuff, he was actually chasing them away without offering them a meal? We didn’t even say we’d be staying for lunch, so who are you guarding against!

Ren Xiaosu found Yang Xiaojin and told her, “The Qing Consortium will likely launch an attack on Stronghold 88 soon. What’s your opinion?”

In fact, what worried Ren Xiaosu the most was how Yang Xiaojin was also a member of the Yang Consortium. If the Yang Consortium’s stronghold came under attack, could she possibly stay out of it?

Yang Xiaojin was silent for some time before replying, “I’ll stay here.”

It seemed that the estrangement between Yang Xiaojin and the Yang Consortium was not as simple as their kinship fading. She had never mentioned her parents before. Based on her age, her parents should both be in their prime, so why were they not around?

If Yang Xiaojin did not wish to talk about it, Ren Xiaosu would not ask her either. But he understood there had to be more to this.

But even though Yang Xiaojin could ignore the Yang Consortium, she would not want to harm them. So she decided to stay out of it by remaining here in the settlement.

After all, Ren Xiaosu would inevitably clash with the Yang Consortium if he cooperated with Luo Lan to get Yan Liuyuan and the others out when he went back this time.

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "I'll be back as soon as possible."

"I'll wait for you here."

Chapter 365 The fall of the Li Consortium

In the Southwest, Li Shentan was walking alone in a vast forest on a small path that was only wide enough for a car to pass. The ground had turned muddy after a downpour.

He was carrying a fishing rod on his shoulder with a fish basket hanging from his waist.

In the fish basket made out of bamboo strips, two large river shrimps were wriggling, and three crabs had their pincers and legs tied up with hemp twine. Each crab looked like it weighed around 1 to 1.5kg. If these crabs were caught in the times before The Cataclysm, they would definitely be considered a good catch.

"Little Liren, did you get a good look at what that shadow in the river was?" Li Shentan asked.

Si Liren's sweet voice could be heard above him. "No, I didn't really see it."

Li Shentan curled his lips. "It was quite scary."

"Don't worry, it can't beat me," Si Liren comforted.

"I was just worried I would get eaten by it before you could save me." Li Shentan said with a smile, "But luck is on my side today. Although I did not catch any fish, I caught quite a few shrimps and crabs."

At this moment, the sound of an approaching vehicle came from further up the path. Li Shentan stood still with a calm expression on his face.

When the vehicle appeared, the driver behind the wheel was shocked to see Li Shentan standing there. "Get out of the way! Get out of the way!"

The driver frantically honked at him, but Li Shentan just stood there motionlessly like a rock.

The driver stepped on the brakes, but the vehicle could not stop due to the muddy ground. The middle-aged man in the vehicle gritted his teeth as it headed straight for Li Shentan. He could not turn his steering wheel at this moment because the vehicle would flip if he did.

Just as the off-road vehicle was about to hit Li Shentan, the little girl in the sky suddenly dropped down from above and smashed her tiny fist heavily on its hood.

This punch caused the entire rear half of the off-road vehicle to fly into the air. Then it flipped over Li Shentan in midair before landing in the mud behind him.

“Li Shentan, the damsel is here to save you!” Si Liren said happily.

Li Shentan smiled but did not answer. Instead, he turned around and looked behind at the off-road vehicle that had just overturned. “How sad.”

The driver was stuck in his seat and dangling in midair. He cursed from within the vehicle, “Are you fucking blind! You—”.

Before he could finish speaking, Si Liren floated over and flipped the vehicle back upright. Then she effortlessly lifted the old man in the backseat out.

The old man had a look of horror on his face. Li Shentan said with a smile, “It’s our first time meeting. Hi, my name is Li Shentan.”

When this name was mentioned, the old man became even more frightened. “How did you know I was going to be passing through here? What do you want?”

Li Shentan said with a smile, “It seems you know nothing about my power, but there’s no need to think about these meaningless things. What I’m curious about is, didn’t the Qing Consortium surround the stronghold awhile ago? How did you manage to get past their perimeter?”

The old man’s face darkened. “What exactly do you want from me?”

Li Shentan muttered to himself, “Oh, I see. You made a deal with that demon, Qing Zhen, so you can abandon the entire Li Consortium and escape alone. Where does this road lead? There’s a mountain road up ahead that goes all the way to the Central Plains. So you must be fleeing there.”

At this moment, Si Liren said, “Big Brother Shentan, there’s a lot of gold bars in the vehicle!”

“Mhm.” Li Shentan nodded and said, “Before leaving, you even took all the gold from the Li Consortium’s bank. That’s enough for you to lead a rich life in the Central Plains.”

The middle-aged man hiding in the vehicle did not dare to make a sound. The old man roared, “Li Youbai, kill him with the gun!”

But no matter how much the old man shouted at him, the middle-aged man did not dare to move recklessly.

Li Shentan smiled and said, “You even thought of bringing your son with you to escape together, but sadly, he’s useless. The Li Consortium has fallen from grace so much in your generation.”

In the eyes of Li Shentan, the Li Consortium was unworthy of its reputation. They were but a small warlord exercising sovereignty in a corner of the Southwest.

He said to the old man, “Dear patriarch of the Li clan, let me guess what deal you’ve made with that demon, Qing Zhen...”

Because Si Liren was holding the old man up, his long, sparse hair was scattered messily on his forehead. His face turned red as he said, "How dare you claim others are demons when you're the demon yourself!"

"I didn't say he was the only demon in this world." Li Shentan said with a smile, "I'm one as well. But let's get back to the point. Over a month ago, the Qing Consortium suddenly withdrew their troops from the main battlefield, then the most mysterious nanosoldiers of the Li Consortium disappeared shortly after that. The Li Consortium's higher-ups must've thought you were preparing to put up a last stand against the enemy. However, they didn't realize these mysterious nanosoldiers were only your bargaining chip. So what was Qing Zhen's condition for you that he allowed you to leave with the gold? You betrayed the entire Li Consortium this easily?"

The old man did not say anything more. As he was advanced in age, he started getting dizzy after struggling for a bit in Si Liren's hands.

Li Shentan continued, "At that time, the mysterious troops were disguised as wounded soldiers of the Qing Consortium that retreated to the rear. They marched all the way north through the territories controlled by the Qing Consortium with no one stopping them, and they were even provided with supplies and firearms too. As for their destination, even I'm not sure where they're headed. Can you tell me where they went and for what?"

"This has nothing to do with you!" the old man roared.

"I'm a member of the Li Consortium as well." Li Shentan said with a sigh, "I'd wanted to destroy the Li Consortium with my own hands as I was really ashamed of this identity. After all, it wouldn't exactly be too gratifying if the Li Consortium perished just like that."

"You're a madman!"

"But it's not fun anymore." Li Shentan sighed before saying again, "With the imminent destruction of the Li Consortium, you should die alongside it as well."

Si Liren said, "Should I kill them?"

"No, I'll kill them myself. You're still young, so you shouldn't be killing anyone."

Then Li Shentan raised his hand and grabbed a small stone from the ground without physically bending down. With a flick of his finger, the stone flew towards the old man and left a bleeding wound in his forehead.

The small stone stopped at the back of the old man's head and suddenly changed direction to go through the back of the driver's head.

Li Shentan muttered to himself, "So this is how it all ends?"

Si Liren dropped the old man to the muddy ground as though he were a tattered bag. She wondered, "What are we doing next?"

"I don't know." Li Shentan said with a smile, "We'll head to the Central Plains. I heard it's very prosperous. But we have to wait for a little while. Grandpa hasn't arrived yet."

"OK." Si Liren nodded. "When will Grandpa Hu Shuo be here?"

"Tomorrow." Li Shentan suddenly remembered something and said, "Bring the gold in the vehicle along. Ren Xiaosu will definitely like it a lot. We can give it to him the next time we meet."

"Why don't we go look for him in the North?" Si Liren asked curiously.

Li Shentan said calmly, "He probably doesn't want to see me now. We should head to the Central Plains and wait for him there instead."

"OK," Si Liren answered obediently. She then flew into the woods and carried out a huge metal box that she placed over her back. The case was several times bigger than her, so it made her tiny body floating in the air look like a tiny bee. She stuffed the heavy gold pieces into the case, but it didn't look like it took her much effort to carry it on her back.

Li Shentan stood on the quiet path and gazed at the far end of it. He saw sunlight shining down through the woods, and the scattered light looked just like the cold rain falling. He felt a little lost.

Just like a child who had scored a 100 percent on his exam, he should be looking for his parents happily for reward and praise. But in this case, he couldn't find anyone he could share the happiness and success with. 'Mom, I've avenged you.'

Chapter 366 The start of Qing Zhen's territorial expansion

In the darkness outside of Stronghold 88, a convoy of transport trucks were driving on the northern highway. When they arrived at the stronghold, the private troops in charge of guarding the gate carried out a simple search before letting them through. As these were the Yang Consortium's transport trucks, the private troops did not dare to stick their noses in too much.

But shortly after the convoy entered the stronghold, the figure of a young man rolled out from under the truck. He stood up and dusted himself while looking around cautiously.

It was late at night, so there wasn't really anyone around.

Ren Xiaosu walked in the shadows of the streets as he quickly made his way to where Yan Liuyuan and the others were living. Xu Xianchu was the one who taught him how to get into the stronghold that way, and it was surprisingly useful.

He would get there soon. During this time, Ren Xiaosu did not encounter anyone on patrol.

But just when he thought everything was going smoothly, he suddenly saw the familiar figure of a woman in front of him. That person also seemed surprised to see Ren Xiaosu here.

"Ren Xiaosu, didn't you go north for the elimination of the bandits?" Zhou Yingxue asked in surprise.

But just as she finished speaking, she saw Ren Xiaosu charge out of the shadows and swing his palm towards her neck without saying a word.

Zhou Yingxue reacted extremely quickly as she raised her wrist to block the knifehand strike. But she was surprised that they were on completely different levels.

Ren Xiaosu frowned as he looked at Zhou Yingxue, who had fainted onto the ground. It should purely be a coincidence that he encountered Zhou Yingxue here. But her reaction speed from earlier was not something the average person possessed. She was a supernatural being.

After thinking for a moment, he picked Zhou Yingxue off the ground and sprinted in the direction of Yan Liuyuan and the others.

Ren Xiaosu did not know when Qing Zhen's people would make their move, so if he left Zhou Yingxue here, who knew what trouble she could cause after coming around?

However, Ren Xiaosu didn't feel that it was necessary to silence her.

After Ren Xiaosu carried Zhou Yingxue back, he jumped over the wall into the yard without knocking on the door. Upon landing on the other side, he saw Yan Liuyuan pointing a pistol at him.

"Bro?" Yan Liuyuan said in surprise, "Why have you come back all of a sudden? You even brought someone back too?"

Liuyuan was supposed to be keeping watch tonight, but little did he expect such a surprise.

Ren Xiaosu put Zhou Yingxue down onto the ground and said with a smile, "Wake Li Qingzheng and the others up. Tie this Zhou Yingxue up and gag her."

"Alright!" Yan Liuyuan said.

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Did anything happen at home recently?"

Yan Liuyuan hesitated and said with a smile, "Don't worry, we've been doing well."

All of a sudden, Luo Lan's head appeared over the wall from next door. "You're finally back. Any later and we wouldn't have made it in time!"

Ren Xiaosu said curiously, "Xu Man told me it was supposed to take place ten days later, and it's only been three days since then."

Luo Lan replied, "This matter is a little beyond our control. We aren't sure when exactly they'll make their move, so it could happen at any moment."

But just as he finished speaking, Ren Xiaosu heard a sudden explosion in the silence of the night!

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "Beyond your control? Who exactly is coming to attack Stronghold 88? Aren't they your people?"

"It's the Li Consortium's people. I don't have time to explain, so quickly pack everything up. My men will be here soon." Luo Lan anxiously whisper-shouted, "Let's hurry up and leave while the Yang Consortium deals with the attackers!"

"How many people from the Li Consortium are here?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"A regiment of 1,500 soldiers." Luo Lan said, "This is the last of the Li Consortium's forces."

As they spoke, the southern part of the stronghold was set ablaze. Gunfire ripped through the peace of the night and loud explosions rang out. Ren Xiaosu wondered, "How can 1,500 soldiers possibly take down a stronghold of the Yang Consortium?"

Luo Lan glanced at him. "They're 1,500 nanosoldiers."

Just as Stronghold 88 started turning chaotic, the last stronghold of the Li Consortium at the front lines of the southern battlefield was declared destroyed.

The Yang Consortium's leader at the front line, Yang Yuning, said to his trusted aide beside him, "Seize control of the Li Consortium's stronghold. After we get inside, we must quickly occupy the favorable terrain. Lay in ambush and kill all of the Qing Consortium's troops that enter the stronghold together. Don't show them any mercy!"

But before the Yang Consortium could rush into the stronghold, Yang Yuning suddenly heard an ear-piercing sound come from the sky. It was the sound of artillery fire penetrating through the air, and it was fired from the Qing Consortium's position.

He instinctively roared, "Qing Zhen, you treacherous scoundrel!"

After the destruction of the Li Consortium, there would no longer be any basis for the Yang Consortium and the Qing Consortium's alliance.

The Yang Consortium was planning to attack the Qing Consortium before this, but Yang Yuning did not expect the Qing Consortium to not even bother taking down the Li Consortium's stronghold before sneak attacking against them!

The Yang Consortium was still not ruthless enough!

"Go prone!" Yang Yuning roared. "Order the nanosoldiers to break through and take out Qing Yi!"

But just as he finished speaking, a soldier beside him pointed his gun at him and started shooting merciless. Before he could finish firing all the rounds in his magazine, the soldier collapsed in a pool of blood.

However, the Yang Consortium's general, Yang Yuning, had already been shot to death!

No one knew how long Qing Zhen had been preparing for this day. All those countless days and nights that Qing Zhen had spent playing those unnecessary moves had now dealt continuous fatal blows to his enemies in just a short few months.

The reinforced company in charge of guarding the general immediately surrounded him. Amid the chaos, someone shouted they were being attacked. But the artillery fire in the sky was already arriving.

Right from the beginning, the Qing Consortium dealt them a vicious blow. The Yang Consortium's troops were surrounded by smoke and mud after artillery shells hit their area. The artillery troops the Qing Consortium had kept hidden for the longest time had fired at strategic locations like it didn't cost a thing. It was as though they wanted to bombard the entire battlefield once over.

The Yang Consortium's nanosoldiers on standby to attack Qing Yi's command center were immediately deployed. But just as they were about to charge diagonally to the front of the Yang Consortium's position, they realized someone at the Qing Consortium's position had suddenly removed the tarps on the armored vehicles.

There was a dense matrix of gun barrels on those black armored vehicles!

It was the metal storm, the Mountain Obliterator!

The thousand-odd nanosoldiers were blasted to shreds in an instant. Even before they died, they did not understand why these Mountain Obliterators appeared here. It wasn't mentioned in their intel at all!

The intel they received was false!

Qing Yi stood behind an armored vehicle and sneered, "Third Bro was indeed right. These nanosoldiers are just a fancy bunch."

The third brother Qing Yi was referring to was Qing Zhen. Qing Zhen was third oldest among their group of cousins.

And according to Qing Zhen, these nanomachines that had always been hailed as the battlefield's divine weapons were really just bells and whistles in the face of modern artillery fire.

When they annihilated the Divine Arms Battalion some time ago, Qing Zhen had said it was an extremely dumb tactic to use the nanosoldiers by putting them together. They should be used for infiltration, carrying out decapitation strikes, intelligence gathering, and destruction of key enemy installations. They shouldn't appear on the main battlefield at all. Unless, of course, the enemies were caught off guard.

Just like in Stronghold 88, no one had imagined there would be an entire formation of nanosoldiers breaking through the Qing Consortium's defensive line and arriving here.

Even though the Yang Consortium had tried their best to monitor the movements of all the Qing Consortium's combat troops, they had neglected to keep tabs on the Li Consortium, which was fighting a desperate last stand.

Chapter 367 Towards the wilderness of hope

Ren Xiaosu was unaware of what was going on at the southern front line. He only knew this stronghold was finished when he saw the fiery flames in Stronghold 88.

Currently, the permanent garrison troops of Stronghold 88 were only left with the military strength of an independent infantry regiment. If this were a normal defense, even an infantry brigade would not be able to defeat it, unless it was an armored brigade or rocket troops.

But the whereabouts of all the Qing Consortium's fighting forces were known to the Yang Consortium's intelligence agency. It was impossible that they could have allowed the Qing Consortium's heavy firepower troops to get so close to Stronghold 88.

But ever since these nanosoldiers started moving north, they had relied on their high mobility to travel through the wilderness and never once showed themselves on the main roads. Although normal troops could not travel through such difficult terrain, it proved to be just walking on flat ground for these nanosoldiers.

This was also the reason why Qing Zhen chose to have these nanosoldiers infiltrate the Yang Consortium's stronghold. Even Qing Zhen's elite troops couldn't break through the Yang Consortium's defensive line without raising a ruckus.

But nanosoldiers could.

At this moment, the flames were spreading towards the north. Ren Xiaosu realized it was moving in a straight line like a precise scalpel cutting into the Yang Consortium's vital points.

After destroying the gate and breaking into the stronghold, these nanosoldiers did not fight the garrison troops. Instead, they continued heading north as they sought to destroy the Yang Consortium's manor and kill all of the Yang Consortium's higher-ups located there.

Although the Yang Consortium's higher-ups were distributed across more than a dozen strongholds, 60% of them were located here in the Yang Consortium's manor at Stronghold 88. If this place were destroyed, the Yang Consortium would immediately fall into a state of disarray.

Once the front line collapsed and the rear was without a leader, the Qing Consortium would probably push forward unopposed and devour the already defeated Yang Consortium bit by bit.

"Ugh."

When Ren Xiaosu heard that sound, he turned around and saw Zhou Yingxue slowly regaining consciousness. Zhou Yingxue was staring blankly at the flames. She could also hear the thunder of firearms and explosives. Suddenly, she said in panic, "Let me go! My mother's still at home!"

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. He hesitated for a second before walking over to Zhou Yingxue and said, "I have nothing against you. I won't blame you for spying on me since you and I are looking at the matter from a different standpoint. But if I let you go here, don't cause any trouble for me, got it?"

Zhou Yingxue looked calmly at Ren Xiaosu. "OK!"

Ren Xiaosu cut the hemp rope tied around Zhou Yingxue. She jumped over the wall without hesitation and disappeared.

Ren Xiaosu was no longer afraid the Yang Consortium would come and stop them. After all, they could hardly even look after themselves.

Suddenly, tires screeched against ground in front of their door. Luo Lan roared, "Ren Xiaosu, hurry up and come with me. We have to leave this troublesome place. Those Li Consortium's nanosoldiers won't care if we're from the Yang Consortium or not once they start their killing spree."

When Ren Xiaosu pushed open the front yard's door, he saw a lot of the stronghold's residents coming out onto the streets and watching the flames around them. Some people were hiding in the buildings, thinking it would be safer at home.

Two transport trucks were parked at the door and were surrounded by the Qing Consortium's soldiers, who were standing guard. These soldiers had infiltrated Stronghold 88 earlier, but Luo Lan knew very well that they could not rescue him from here and were only responsible for aiding him.

Ren Xiaosu helped Wang Fugui, Xiaoyu, and the others into the vehicles. Within two minutes, everyone was seated in the back of the truck in an orderly manner.

Luo Lan roared, "Start driving! Go, go, go! I don't want to be buried along with Stronghold 88!"

Ren Xiaosu looked back at the blazing flames where the 1,500 nanosoldiers were. If he could just get his hands on some of the nanomachines, it would be enough for everyone here to get stronger. But he could not take the risk because he knew his priorities.

If they turned around now, all of them could end up dying here instead. Ren Xiaosu would rather not get those nanomachines.

The two trucks sped along the streets towards the east gate. When the stronghold residents saw the way those two trucks took flight, everyone started panicking as well and began fleeing in the same direction as the trucks.

"Ren Xiaosu," Luo Lan called out in the back of the truck during the bumpy ride, "come with me to the Qing Consortium!"

Ren Xiaosu glanced at Yan Liuyuan, then shook his head. "No."

Puzzled, Luo Lan asked, "If you follow me to the Qing Consortium, you'll have meat to eat and wine to drink. There'll be plenty of money to spend, and you can get chauffeured around in luxury cars. Wouldn't it be such bliss to drive luxury cars and take beautiful women out for a spin?"

Ren Xiaosu smiled. "I've thought about living in the stronghold before, but I have a better option now. I still feel that the wilderness is more suitable for me."

Yan Liuyuan's eyes lit up. "Bro, where we going?"

“Our new home.” Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, “A place where there’s hope.”

Yan Liuyuan was taken aback. He replied, “Bro, thank you.”

“What are you thanking me for?” Ren Xiaosu said, “I really think that it’s a good place.”

Luo Lan lamented, “Xu Man already told me about this. I can only wish you all the best then. In the future, you can visit our Qing Consortium. Just mention my name wherever you go.”

“OK.” Ren Xiaosu nodded and said, “I will.”

Although they did not want to settle down in the Qing Consortium’s territory, they could still visit. But that would definitely be a long time from now. The current Qing Consortium would probably be involved in the war for a long time to come. At this moment, the Qing Consortium was no longer a consortium but a war machine.

“But the bridges in the north have probably been destroyed by now, so how are you guys going to head north?” Luo Lan asked. “Now there’s a large river separating the north and the south, so you can’t pass through that

area.”

“Don’t worry, I have a plan,” Ren Xiaosu replied calmly.

The bandit gangs controlled by the Qing Consortium in the north had come down to the south. They had destroyed not only the bridges but also all of the Yang Consortium’s factories in the wilderness.

If it were the past, he definitely couldn’t have crossed the large river. But now he could. He really had Wang Congyang to thank for presenting him with the steam locomotive.

Ren Xiaosu had already tested it earlier. The steam locomotive could travel on any terrain like it was moving on flat ground. The tracks that materialized out of thin air allowed it to cross any rivers.

When the two trucks arrived at the east gate, there were only a few garrison troops remaining. When the soldiers were about to inspect the vehicles, the Qing Consortium’s soldiers got out and killed them in an orderly fashion. How could these private troops guarding the gate be a match for the Qing Consortium’s regular troops?

After the Qing Consortium’s soldiers blew up the gate, the trucks burst through the enveloping smoke and drove out into the wilderness.

This escape from a stronghold was much easier than all of their previous experiences. Ren Xiaosu turned cheerful the moment he finally managed to get Yan Liuyuan and the others out of the stronghold.

Everything was developing positively, and Ren Xiaosu started looking forward to their future in the wilderness.

But when he looked back at the sky filled with smoke at Stronghold 88, Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt this was probably not something he should be happy over.

This era was starting to collapse.

Could they really carve out a future of their own in the wilderness?

Chapter 368 A gift

The people who appeared in the stronghold were not the only ones who had come to pick Luo Lan up. Xu Man had also led a team to wait outside of Stronghold 88. It was as though he were afraid that something would go wrong in the process of rescuing Luo Lan.

It seemed that the brotherhood between Luo Lan and Qing Zhen was indeed strong. Qing Zhen was even willing to destroy an entire stronghold for Luo Lan.

When Ren Xiaosu first met Luo Lan at Stronghold 88, Luo Lan said Qing Zhen would definitely rescue him. Meanwhile, Qing Zhen had already made all the preparations for the rescue when he suddenly ordered the withdrawal of the Qing Consortium's combat troops and left the Yang Consortium's troops stranded at the front line.

Even if Qing Zhen had not been able to turn the tables on the Board in that chaotic struggle for power, this rescue mission would still have been carried out accordingly, with Qing Yi's assistance, and the nanosoldiers would still have arrived at Stronghold 88 within the planned time.

On the day Qing Zhen trekked up to Mt. Ginkgo, he had laid out everything for Luo Lan before the snowstorm arrived.

Before they parted, Luo Lan was no longer trying to persuade Ren Xiaosu to go back to the Qing Consortium with them. He said to Ren Xiaosu, "Once you've all settled down in the valley, you can contact me. I'll get Xu Man to send some supplies to you. Consider it my congratulations to you on your new home."

"Sure!" Ren Xiaosu did not be overly polite as they bade each other farewell.

In this world, all good things had to come to an end. Ren Xiaosu and the others were about to head off towards that hope and light in their hearts.

On their way back to the valley, Yan Liuyuan asked, "Bro, what's it like in the valley?"

Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "It's a poor place where the homes are made out of mud. The land for growing crops has also been destroyed, and there's a gang of bandits so poor that they only have guns, while there's no one left for them to rob."

Yan Liuyuan listened to this seriously but did not say anything.

Ren Xiaosu asked, "So are you still willing to go there?"

"Yes, of course." Yan Liuyuan's eyes gleamed as he said, "Is Big Sister Xiaojin there too? She..."

"Yeah, she's also there." Ren Xiaosu nodded and said, "Together with the bandits, the two of us usually dig for silt to make clay bricks to build houses with. We even give lessons to those bandits too."

Yan Liuyuan asked, "Can I also build houses with y'all?"

"Of course you can," Ren Xiaosu said.

Yan Liuyuan was not afraid that life would be tough. As long as there were hope, he would still be very happy even if he had to carry bricks and build houses.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Wang Yuchi, Jiang Wu, and the others behind him. Ms. Jiang had been very quiet ever since several of her female students left the group. No one knew what she was thinking about every day.

Ren Xiaosu said to Yan Liuyuan, "Let's go! Bro will take you for a spin!"

"How are we going for a spin?" Yan Liuyuan wondered. "We don't even have a car. I thought we were going to walk to the valley."

Stronghold 88 was more than 400 kilometers away from the valley, with two strongholds between them. It would even take Ren Xiaosu three days to run back there.

However, Ren Xiaosu suddenly summoned the steam locomotive as though he had no intention of hiding this superpower. When Wang Fugui saw the train, he was stunned. "Xiaosu, this is... a train?!"

"That's right." Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "Let's go for a ride on the train!"

Everyone behind him started laughing. Other people would take beautiful women out for a spin in their luxury cars, but when it came to Ren Xiaosu, that became a train ride with a bunch of men, women, seniors, and teens.

Why was everything that came out of Ren Xiaosu's mouth always a little different from imagination?

"Come on, step onto the train," Ren Xiaosu shouted excitedly. With life full of hope now, he became particularly energetic and motivated in everything he did.

The group sat inside the steam train as they watched the tracks in front of them change from illusion into reality. At the same time, the tracks behind them vanished segment by segment after the train passed by. This moment felt just like a dream.

Xiaoyu asked, "Xiaosu, is this train your superpower?" To her memory, Ren Xiaosu had never revealed his superpowers before, and this was the first time he was showing it. "What does this power of yours do?"

Ren Xiaosu thought carefully. "I can use it to run some deliveries? When Stronghold 178 opens up the trade route in the future, I can go and pick up some goods to deliver. I wonder how much money I can make by delivering a trainload of goods?"

In reality, it was not about the money. He just wanted to put into service what he had learned.

He wondered what Wang Congyang would think if he found out about this idea of his. Wang Congyang had probably not even thought about using his superpower to run a freight business.

This was mainly because supernatural beings had a limit to their willpower. Even Wang Congyang could only “drive” the train for half a day without carrying any load, and this was not even traveling at full speed.

But it was different for Ren Xiaosu. From the moment he copied the “Steam Locomotive” power, he already had 12 more carriages than Wang Congyang’s version. Moreover, he did not even feel his mental strength being drained while using it.

Actually, Ren Xiaosu had still not realized that his most advantageous skill was not in being able to copy other people’s superpowers but that he had a mysterious mental strength that greatly surpassed that of other supernatural beings.

It was extremely quick to travel using the steam locomotive without the constraint of doing so with one’s own limbs. Currently, there were no consortiums in the Northwest that had the power to stop supernatural beings. In fact, those consortiums were already busy up to the ears with their own matters. Meanwhile, the relationships between Ren Xiaosu and both the Qing Consortium and Stronghold 178 right now could also be considered as quite friendly, right?

As the steam locomotive crossed the river en route to the valley, the natural moat that it provided was navigated over as though it were flat ground. All of the worries everyone had were instantly cast out of their minds.

Ren Xiaosu reminded them, “When we get to the settlement, don’t mention this power of mine. Those bandits still can’t be trusted.”

Wang Fugui and the others nodded in agreement. They still understood the seriousness of the situation. When they were about to arrive at the valley, Ren Xiaosu put away the steam locomotive and led everyone there on foot.

When they finally arrived, the settlement was still in ruins. Yang Xiaojin, who had her sleeves rolled up, was helping the refugees carry the harvested corn and sweet potatoes to store them in the trucks left behind by Xu Man.

Her face was very dirty, and it did not look like she was the heiress of a consortium. She looked like she was a refugee her whole life.

When Yang Xiaojin turned around and saw Ren Xiaosu and the others walking over, she waved happily to them. Yan Liuyuan did not seem saddened by the sight of the ruins at all. He waved at Yang Xiaojin and shouted, “Sister-in-law!”

As this was the first time Yan Liuyuan had addressed Yang Xiaojin as “sister-in-law,” she was stunned.

Suddenly, Yan Liuyuan felt someone kick his butt. When he turned around, he saw Ren Xiaosu blushing furiously. “Stop messing around!”

Meanwhile, Yang Xiaojin had a calm expression on her face. This was mainly because the bandits had already been addressing her as “Boss Lady”[1] for the past few days, so she was used to it and was willing to be addressed this way.

Xiaoyu came over to Yang Xiaojin and took out a handkerchief to wipe her face. She smiled and said, “What a terrible shame for a nice girl like you! It’s akin to planting a beautiful flower in cow dung.

Ren Xiaosu said unhappily, “Hey, watch your words. Who’re you saying is cow dung?!”

Xiaoyu ignored him. Instead, she took out a gold bracelet and put it on for Yang Xiaojin. “Big Sis doesn’t have much money, and this bracelet is not heavy enough either, so please don’t mind it. When Big Sis has more money, I’ll buy another more expensive one for you.”

Yang Xiaojin did not decline it. Rather, she smiled gleefully and said, “Of course. I don’t mind, I like it a lot.”

Chapter 369 Getting ready for battle

Xiaoyu kept looking at Yang Xiaojin. The more she looked at her, the more she liked her. Yang Xiaojin looked very cultured and was beautiful as well. At the same time, it did not feel like she was a delicate girl who could not fend for herself.

Where else could she find a sister-in-law like her?

Xiaoyu was already thinking about the dowry for Ren Xiaosu before the relationship had even started taking shape. She even wanted to ask Ren Xiaosu what he would name his child. How many children would Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin have? If they only had two, she could help take care of them. But any more than that and it would be really tough for her to handle.

When everyone went back to work, Xiaoyu secretly asked Ren Xiaosu, “Did you use the tent that Big Sis prepared for you?”

The first thing that Xiaoyu thought about the moment they arrived here was this. When she saw that there was not even a proper place for them to live, she knew the tent would definitely come in handy!

But as Xiaoyu joyfully waited for his reply, Ren Xiaosu stammered, “She sleeps inside the tent while I sleep outside.”

Xiaoyu pinched Ren Xiaosu hard. “How could you let such a good opportunity slip?!” He had wasted all her efforts! Everything she’d done had been for nothing!

To avoid further questioning, Ren Xiaosu quickly went over to the refugees and gathered everyone together. “I believe everyone already knows that the Zong Consortium in the north probably knows that we’re here. Now that the South is in chaos, we might be in danger if we continue living here.”

At this moment, Jin Lan took the lead and shouted, “Boss, we’ll follow you wherever you go!”

Ren Xiaosu paused for half a minute before suddenly saying, “Actually, I’m not from Stronghold 178.”

He felt that a wonderful hope should not be mixed with deception. If that dream were really worth it, there should be no impurities. So he had to be honest with them.

After the bandits gradually quieted down, Ren Xiaosu continued, "I know both Xu Xianchu and Zhang Jinglin, and we even have a good relationship, but I'm not actually from Stronghold 178. If any of you wish to leave, I can write you a recommendation letter. As for whether you'll be allowed to join Stronghold 178, I can't guarantee that."

Ren Xiaosu waited for everyone to make their decision. He was not pinning much hope on most of them choosing to remain with him. He had spoken the truth as he did not wish to deceive this group of people anymore.

Sure enough, most of the bandits started looking at one another after hearing what Ren Xiaosu said.

Regardless of whether the method that Ren Xiaosu had previously used to fool them was effective or not, even though everyone enjoyed the process of earning the bullets, they only chose to stay around because they ultimately were looking to join Stronghold 178. So the moment the truth was revealed, everyone instinctively hesitated.

Someone stepped forward and said, "Boss, to be honest, I only chose to stay behind because I really wanted to go to Stronghold 178. So..."

Ren Xiaosu nodded. He beckoned for Yan Liuyuan to get pen and paper, then wrote a letter to Xu Xianchu and Zhang Jinglin on the spot. However, he could not guarantee that Stronghold 178 would take them in as a favor to him.

Once someone got the ball rolling, the next bandit stepped forward and asked for a recommendation letter as well. Even though they were very happy here, their future was much more important. It was Stronghold 178 they were talking about.

Within half an hour, roughly one-third of the 300-odd bandits had left.

Ren Xiaosu was not unhappy. Rather, he appeared unusually calm.

There was no point in forcing them to stay if they wanted to leave. He was no longer willing to resort to lies in order to keep these people around.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Jin Lan. "Why aren't you going?"

Jin Lan replied with a smile, "I already guessed that was the case."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "You guessed it?"

"Boss, I'm not stupid." Jin Lan said with a smile, "If Stronghold 178 really wanted to unify the valley, they wouldn't have to act so cautiously and only send two people here. With just a word from them, 99% of the bandits in the valley would take up the offer immediately."

“Then you...” Ren Xiaosu was startled. He wanted to ask Jin Lan and the others why they did not leave if that were the case.

Jin Lan said with a smile, “I’m in that 1%. When you and Boss Lady jumped into the muddy river and dug for silt together with us, I decided that I would follow you and explore the opportunities in the valley. Even if it wasn’t the valley, we’d still have followed you wherever.”

After Jin Lan spoke up, Zhang Yiheng added, “There’s nothing great about Stronghold 178 anyway. It gets so fucking cold there in the winter that we wouldn’t even know who we are, so it’s no loss even if we don’t go there.”

Xu Jinyuan said, “Bandits don’t meet with a good end. We’ve come across all kinds of bandit leaders before, but this is the first time I’ve encountered a leader like you. It doesn’t matter if we can’t go to Stronghold 178. We’ll just go wherever you say, Boss!”

Ren Xiaosu was speechless. Meanwhile, Yan Liuyuan, Yang Xiaojin, and the others were watching quietly from the side. Perhaps this was the reason why Ren Xiaosu liked it out here.

They had been wandering through the vast wastelands for about a year now. It seemed like they had just been going from stronghold to stronghold, one after another, yet they never managed to find one they could truly call home.

And now, it seemed like Ren Xiaosu had found it.

Yan Liuyuan whispered, “Sister-in-law, I like this place.”

Yang Xiaojin smiled and patted his head. “Me too.”

Ren Xiaosu took a deep breath and said, “Then let’s head northwest. I purposely checked the records in the library and know that there’s a Mt. Kushui located in the Northwest. Apparently, there’s a valley in that mountain where it’s spring all year ’round. The clear stream that passes through the valley does not freeze even in winter.”

The group of bandits looked at each other and started laughing. “Then let’s head to Mt. Kushui. We’ve also heard of that place before, and some of us thought about going there too. But it seems that an extremely fierce group of wild boars led by a king is active in that area, so no one’s dared to go there.”

Ren Xiaosu shouted, “Everyone, get on your motorcycles and take all your luggage! We’re setting off!”

“We can ride the motorcycles right now?” Xu Jinyuan’s eyes lit up.

“What else would we do with these hundreds of bikes?” Ren Xiaosu was incredulous. “You gonna push them or leave them right here?”

Jin Lan mumbled, “Then do we still need to earn bullets to trade them in after we get to Mt. Kushui?”

Ren Xiaosu answered seriously, “Of course you have to!”

Jin Lan was speechless.

The journey to Mt. Kushui in the north required them to go around the front lines at Mt. Daban, Mt. Tangwang, and Mt. Guan first, traveling about a 100 kilometers west to Mt. Kaolei. After that, they would turn and continue heading north.

It was not that Ren Xiaosu was deliberately trying to take a detour, but that he wanted to avoid all the bandits' camps in case someone discovered their movements.

Now that the South was plunged into a state of chaos, the Zong Consortium had become an uncontrollable hyena in the wilderness. The Zong Consortium had become the most dangerous presence of all.

For this journey, each bandit gave one or two passengers a ride on their motorcycles. The female refugee riding pillion on Xu Jinyuan's bike was so happy she could die. Xu Jinyuan had always been a little reserved towards her. But it was all good now. He was finally not shy about it anymore.

Jin Lan and the others even started teasing Xu Jinyuan. After they got to Mt. Kushui and finished building their houses there, they would hold a wedding for these two!

But on the third day of their journey, Ren Xiaosu was taken aback when they were close to arriving at Mt. Kaolei. "Stop! Stop! Stop!"

Someone asked, "Boss, what's the matter?"

Ren Xiaosu frowned as he looked at their surroundings. He was looking for something.

Ren Xiaosu whispered to Yang Xiaojin, "Quick! Search for a vantage point! The rest of you, find a place to hide. We're under attack!"

Jin Lan reacted and hurriedly gestured to the bandits. "Prepare for battle!"

No one knew where the enemy was, nor even what was going on. But if Ren Xiaosu said so, it definitely meant that danger was approaching.

Zong Cheng had performed a card trick for Ren Xiaosu after they left Stronghold 88 to head into the valley. At that time, Ren Xiaosu deliberately asked Zong Cheng if he could conjure up four "fours" for him. When he drew the cards and covered them in his hands, he switched them out and replaced the four cards with his Explosive Poker cards.

When the two of them parted ways, his mental connection to the Explosive Poker cards "snapped" due to the distance between them. It seemed his control over the Explosive Poker cards was also limited to a distance of around one to two kilometers. As for the specific range, Ren Xiaosu was not exactly sure.

The reason why he was nervous now was because his connection to those four cards had returned.

Zong Cheng was here!

Chapter 370 Come and kill me!

Ren Xiaosu had believed it was unlikely he would ever again come across those four playing cards he had placed on Zong Cheng. But he did not find it sad and even hoped he would never have to see him again. When his new life began, he felt he no longer needed to deal with those people from the consortiums like Zong Cheng anymore.

As they had been carefully avoiding the other bandit gangs along the way, Ren Xiaosu was very sure no one noticed their whereabouts and therefore exposed it to Zong Cheng.

This was something Ren Xiaosu was most careful about, so there couldn't possibly be any mistakes. He had even caught the spy who had infiltrated the group in order to keep their whereabouts a secret. He also decided they would have to leave the settlement they had grown familiar with. But despite all his efforts, their whereabouts had still been exposed.

Zong Cheng's previous route should have taken him in the northeastern direction, so based on that logic, he should absolutely not be appearing here in the west, especially not in the vicinity of Mt. Kaolei.

Ren Xiaosu knew there could have been more than one spy hidden amid them. Moreover, the spy was so good they did not get discovered even after being put through so many observations and tests. That person could even be a former soldier of the Zong Consortium.

A second later, he heard a rumbling getting closer. It sounded like a large number of people were approaching the dune in front of them. Right after, a muffled explosion rang out.

Ren Xiaosu stood in place and asked, "Did y'all hear something?"

It sounded like something had exploded within a hard metal container before dragging its tail across the air. It then traveled in a crazy parabolic trajectory across the sky and headed towards Ren Xiaosu and the others.

Yang Xiaojin, who was still searching for a vantage point, suddenly turned to Ren Xiaosu and shouted, "Ren Xiaosu, it's a mortar!"

With a loud boom, Ren Xiaosu stared blankly at the mortar shell that landed at Xu Jinyuan's feet. Then he was blown into the air.

A large amount of mud and debris was blown off the ground. That female refugee who was in love with Xu Jinyuan ran in tears to the spot where he fell. She hugged his head and cried out to him, but the man she loved no longer responded to her.

There weren't any farewells. In a war, there would hardly ever be any chance to say goodbye.

In fact, Xu Jinyuan was planning to marry her after they arrived at Mt. Kushui, but he just didn't know how to say it to her.

In the middle of the night, he would lie down in the wilderness with his arm cushioning his head and ask Jin Lan, "I'm just a bandit. Do you think I'll be a burden to her by marrying her?"

At the time, Jin Lan and the others laughed and teased Xu Jinyuan for having romantic thoughts.

But at this moment, Jin Lan and the others were stunned by the sight of their comrade falling. “Jinyuan!”

Ren Xiaosu yelled, “Don’t just stand there! Find cover!”

A fit of extreme rage blasted within him. That glimmer of hope that was just starting to bloom in his soul had been utterly wrecked by a mortar shell.

Ren Xiaosu had gotten a glimpse of that hope and their future, but the more beautiful those moments were, the more hopelessness and anger he felt now.

He had seen that hope before.

The enemy was prepared for the attack as they fired off more than one mortar round towards them. They were going all out to ensure that everyone here would die.

Yan Liuyuan immediately activated his nanomachines and retreated with Xiaoyu. The others also quickly looked for concealed spots on the ground to take cover from the shelling in an effort to reduce their casualties.

The mortar shells landed beside them one after another. Within a minute, dozens of bandits were either killed or wounded!

Ren Xiaosu conjured up the steam locomotive out of nothing behind him and yelled, “Everyone, hide in the train!”

But at this moment, another mortar shell landed, directly on the steam locomotive. Ren Xiaosu spat out a mouthful of blood. So it turned out that he would receive backlash whenever the train took damage! But Ren Xiaosu did not even bother wiping off the blood on his mouth. “Motherfucker.”

Ren Xiaosu mumbled, “Motherfucker!”

Motherfucking hell!

Ren Xiaosu suddenly charged in a frenzy towards where the mortars were fired from. He went past layer upon layer of smoke in the wilderness like an angry lion with a bloody spear stabbed in its body!

It only took 20 seconds for Ren Xiaosu to cover that short distance of a few hundred meters and come into view of the enemy’s defensive line. As it turned out, they were the Zong Consortium’s combat troops.

And there were over a 1,000 of them!

Should he go over? If he did, he might not be able to make it out. But if he did not, the mortars would kill everyone behind him.

Ren Xiaosu started charging again at the defensive line of over a 1,000 people. His lone figure on the desolate wasteland made him resemble a solitary boat in front of a towering tsunami. At the same time, it also made him look like the most brilliant star in the sky!

Ren Xiaosu roared, "Zong Cheng, don't you want to kill me? I'm right here! Where are you!"

His voice reverberated like a large bell being struck. Ren Xiaosu subconsciously detonated the Explosive Poker cards, and two seconds later, a fireball suddenly shot up in the air at the rear of the defensive line!

That was the "gift" from Ren Xiaosu to Zong Cheng, but he hated himself a little at this moment as he thought, 'Why didn't I finish off this hyena from the north when I had the chance!'

Self-blame, remorse, and anger formed into a killing intent within him!

But after the Explosive Poker cards exploded, there were still no signs of chaos within the Zong Consortium's defensive line. This told Ren Xiaosu that something was wrong. It was not the normal way a fighting force would react when its commander fell!

Zong Cheng was probably not dead yet!

How could Zong Cheng still be alive?!

Ren Xiaosu immediately summoned his shadow clone and instantly covered his entire body with the nanoarmor. The two figures abruptly changed their direction on the battlefield and dashed towards where the Explosive Poker cards had just gone off!

Without seeing for himself that Zong Cheng had really died, Ren Xiaosu would never be able to accept it.

A moment later, the shadow clone rushed in against the intense gunfire ahead of Ren Xiaosu and charged straight into the battlefield where over a 1,000 soldiers were holding the line!

The fearsome shadow clone forced a bloody path through the crowd for Ren Xiaosu to follow.

Amid the chaos, Ren Xiaosu held his black saber in one hand while using the other to constantly throw the grenades he had stored after pulling out the pins on them.

After he ran out of grenades to throw, he started throwing the Explosive Poker cards next. The gratitude tokens he had originally accumulated to around 900 were decreasing rapidly, but he showed no signs of hesitation.

No one was expecting Ren Xiaosu to barge into the defensive line alone, and they didn't expect him to remain unharmed up til now either.

Ren Xiaosu started killing his way through the ranks while the surrounding Zong Consortium's soldiers shot indiscriminately at him. However, they discovered that the armored monster and black shadow did not seem like they were affected by the attacks at all.

Someone attempted to aim an RPG at Ren Xiaosu, but Ren Xiaosu deliberately chose to attack where most people were congregated. If the RPG landed there, it would definitely injure many of their own troops!

Ren Xiaosu had single-handedly turned the entire Zong Consortium's defenses upside down!

When Ren Xiaosu looked at his surroundings, the image of Xu Jinyuan's smiling face suddenly appeared in his mind. Then the faces of those around him turned into demonic shadows.

But that did not matter as dawn was already here. The gods were about to rise!

In this brand new age of "The Rise of Gods," superhumans were defined as those who could single-handedly go against a group of people as gods. If this definition held true, Ren Xiaosu was slowly approaching that definition regardless of how he managed to achieve it. Although, he was still a far ways away from achieving that.

The armor on Ren Xiaosu was riddled with holes as the power for it came close to depletion.

He rushed to the spot where the Explosive Poker cards had blown up, but to his surprise, Zong Cheng's corpse wasn't there. Ren Xiaosu roared, "Come and kill me!"